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Complicating the Boundary Between Disability and Non-Disability: *Pure White* (2017) and *Coffee and Pencil* (2011)

XINYI WANG*

Historically, disability has tended to be stereotyped as a flaw or loss, and people with disabilities have frequently been portrayed as incapable and unintelligent victims. Graham Thornicroft argues that popular media has played an important role in constructing the modern image of disability. For instance, characters with mental disabilities, he notes, act insane in *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari* (dir. Robert Wiene, 1920) and appear as murderers in horror movies such as *The Nanny* (dir. Seth Holt, 1965).[1] Analyzing films involving disabilities, Sally Chivers and Nicole Markotić further contend that "an ableist assumption about what and how blind people 'see' makes all blind characters possess a 'zombie-like' stare."[2] Indeed, many films have produced and reproduced various stereotypes of disability, while consistently maintaining a dichotomy between disability and non-disability. In recent years, however, an increasing number of Japanese films have begun to question the stereotypes of disability and the clear boundary between disability and non-disability. How do these recent films deal with this boundary, and what can we learn from these depictions?

In this article, I will first provide a brief historical overview of how Japanese films have represented the boundary between disability and non-disability. Then, I will analyze *Pure White* (真白の恋 *Mashiro no koi*, dir. Sakamoto Yoshihiro 坂本欣弘, 2017) and *Coffee and Pencil* (珈琲とエンピツ *Kōhī to enpitsu*, dir. Imamura Ayako 今村彩子, 2011), arguing that these two contemporary films complicate the boundary between disability and non-disability in significant ways. *Pure White* blurs the boundary by highlighting the emotions of a character with a mental disability who falls in love with a character without disabilities, while at the same time using unresolved communication failures to point to the existence of an insuperable barrier of disability. By contrast, *Coffee and Pencil* implies that the boundary between disability and non-disability is ambiguous and presents alternatives to ableist norms of communication. It

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[1] Graham Thornicroft, *Seishin shōgaisha sabetsu to wa nani ka* 精神障害者差別とは何か, Aoki Shōzō 青木省三 and Suwa Hiroshi 諏訪浩 trans., Nihonhyōronsha 日本評論社, 2006, p. 148.

[2] Sally Chivers and Nicole Markotić eds., *The Problem Body: Projecting Disability on Film*, Ohio State University Press, 2010, p. 78.

emphasizes the potentialities of deaf people who are able to use body language and handwritten notes to succeed in achieving mutual understanding with others, including those without disabilities. Although scholars such as Benjamin Fraser,[3] Shweta Ghosh,[4] and Lennard Davis[5] have criticized the tendency of films to convey ideas about disability through stereotyped characters with disabilities that are performed by actors and actresses without disabilities, few researchers have lent sufficient attention to filmic representations of the boundary between disability and non-disability. Exploration of the conflictual boundary in *Pure White* and *Coffee and Pencil* can help us understand how contemporary filmic representation of disability in Japan challenges fixed stereotypes about emotions and communication.

1 Mapping Films

This section presents a historical overview of how the boundary between disability and non-disability has been depicted in postwar Japanese films. I show that the way the boundary is represented has, by and large, shifted from recapitulation of fixed assumptions to a much more complex and ambiguous approach.

Before the 1980s, Japanese films on disability generally took for granted a fixed boundary between disability and non-disability. Although more extensive research remains to be done on this topic, we can easily identify a clear boundary at work in many pre-1980s films such as *Forgotten Soldiers* (*Wasurerareta kōgun* 忘れられた皇軍, dir. Ōshima Nagisa, 1963) and *Seisaku's Wife* (*Seisaku no tsuma* 清作の妻, dir. Masumura Yasuzō, 1965). In these films, the clear line drawn between disability and non-disability is employed as the standard for selecting or retaining soldiers for the military. Veterans are depicted as having a range of disabilities as a result of wars. In other films, natural or man-made disasters result in disability and make the boundary visible, as in Tsuchimoto Noriaki's series of documentaries about Minamata disease (1971–2004). The boundary between disability and non-disability is also clear in the Zatōichi (座頭市) series and its remakes (dir. Misumi Kenji, Mori Kazuo, et al., 1962–1989; dir. Kitano

[3] Benjamin Fraser, *Cultures of Representation: Disability in World Cinema Contexts*, Wallflower Press, 2016, p. 6.
[4] Shweta Ghosh, "Disability on and off Film: A Filmmaker's Perspective", University of York Symposium on Rethinking Disability on Screen, January 2015, conference paper published online at https://www.researchgate.net/publication/316596174 (accessed 30 January 2021).
[5] Lennard J. Davis, "The Ghettoization of Disability: Paradoxes of Visibility and Invisibility in Cinema," in *Culture–Theory–Disability: Encounters between Disability Studies and Cultural Studies*, Anne Waldschmidt, Hanjo Berressem, and Moritz Ingwersen eds., Transcript Verlag, 2017, pp. 39–50.

Takeshi, 2003) and in the numerous adaptations of *The Story of Shunkin* (*Shunkinshō* 春琴抄, dir. Shimazu Yasujirō 1935; dir. Itō Daisuke, 1954; dir. Kinugasa Teinosuke, 1961; dir. Shindō Kaneto, 1972; dir. Nishikawa Katsumi, 1976; dir. Kanada Satoshi, 2008). Importantly, these films endow disabled characters with special talents, such as skilled swordplay or musical virtuosity. Disability is highlighted as a unique talent through which characters become able to reach a state of deep focus impossible for others.

In the 1980s, however, an increasing number of Japanese films began to blur the boundary between disability and non-disability. After the success of the Tokyo Paralympic Games in 1964 and the founding of the Association for Employment of Disabled Persons (*Shōgaisha Kōyō Sokushin Kyōkai* 障害者雇用促進協会) in 1971, filmmakers gradually began to pay attention to discrimination against people with disabilities and began to challenge the hitherto clear boundary.[6] Films from the 1980s and 1990s such as *This Is Noriko* (*Noriko wa, ima* 典子は、今, dir. Matsuyama Zenzō, 1982), *A Scene at the Sea* (*Ano natsu, ichiban shizukana umi* あの夏、いちばん静かな海, dir. Kitano Takeshi, 1991) and *My Sons* (*Musuko* 息子, dir. Yamada Yōji, 1991) show people with disabilities having abilities equal to those without them. Paralleling the development of welfare systems and human rights laws since the 1990s, the boundary between disability and non-disability has come to be questioned from the perspective of emotion and affect, traits possessed equally by people with and without disabilities. A number of contemporary films have focused on the relationship between characters with disabilities and those who take care of them, including *Quill* (*Kuīru* クイール, dir. Sai Yōichi, 2004), *The 8-Year Engagement* (*Hachinen-goshi no hanayome: kiseki no jitsuwa* 8 年越しの花嫁 奇跡の実話, dir. Zeze Takahisa, 2017), and *A Banana? At This Time of Night?* (*Konna yofuke ni banana ka yo* こんな夜更けにバナナかよ, dir. Maeda Tetsu, 2018). These films indicate the ambiguous nature of the boundary through their portrayals of mutual care.

Since the 2000s, it has become even more evident that Japanese films have come to represent the boundary between disability and non-disability as something complex, ambiguous, and conflictual. Contemporary Japanese animated works such as the film *A Silent Voice* (*Koe no katachi* 聲の形, dir. Yamada Naoko, 2016) and the television adaptation of *Violet Evergarden* (ヴァイオレット・エヴァーガーデン, dir. Ishidate Taichi, 2018) illuminate how characters

[6] Government of Japan Cabinet Office 内閣府, "Shōgaisha shisaku no omo na ayumi" 障害者施策の主な歩み, https://www8.cao.go.jp/shougai/ayumi.html (accessed on 16 December 2020).

with disabilities communicate and express their interiority. Some films represent the dynamic nature of the boundary by making it more clear or blurred at different times, such as *37 Seconds* (37セカンズ, dir. Hikari, 2019) and *Perfect Revolution* (パーフェクト・レボリューション, dir. Matsumoto Junpei, 2017), both of which highlight the emotions of characters when they fall in love and barriers resulting from disability. Other films like *Sweet Bean* (*An* あん, dir. Kawase Naomi, 2015) and *Start Line* (スタートライン, dir. Imamura Ayako, 2016) emphasize that those with disabilities are able to lead meaningful lives regardless of difficulties. Although a large number of films now suggest an indeterminate boundary, some representations still reside within the framework of ableism. Due to the intersectional identities of characters with disabilities in terms of gender, ethnicity, class, age, and so on, disability discrimination is not only associated with ableism, but also with the legacies of patriarchy and imperialism as well as the new power structures in place in contemporary Japan. For instance, female characters with disabilities often face the pressures of both ableism and patriarchy, while veterans with disabilities are usually haunted by both ableism and imperialism. Thus, the filmic representation of interactions between characters with and without disabilities can reveal tensions between subject positions, as well as social conventions and power structures that are related to disability.

It is with this in mind that *Pure White* and *Coffee and Pencil* serve as vital cases for us to explore the ambiguous and conflictual boundary between disability and non-disability in contemporary Japanese cinema. *Pure White* is a fiction film that depicts the life of a teenage girl with a mild intellectual disability living in the city of Toyama. *Coffee and Pencil* is a documentary directed by Imamura Ayako, a filmmaker who was born deaf. Using a first-person narrative, Imamura mainly records the daily life of Mr. Ōta (Ōta Tatsurō 太田辰郎, called Ōta-san in the film), a surfboard craftsman and shop owner who was born deaf just as she was.

Although one of the films is fiction and the other nonfiction, my primary purpose here is to examine the boundary between disability and non-disability without regard to genre distinctions. *Pure White* indicates the dynamic nature of the boundary, sometimes clear and sometimes blurred, from the points of view of a variety of characters, including the protagonist Mashiro (真白). On the one hand, the boundary tends to be blurred when Mashiro shows affection. On the other hand, it can appear more clear due to the stereotypes surrounding her disability that are aggravated by ableism and patriarchy. *Coffee and Pencil* represents the ambiguous boundary via the body, handwritten notes, and voice-overs, through which people with and without disabilities are capable of reaching mutual understanding. Importantly, this positive interaction between them is in sharp contrast to the failures to communicate, or "dis-communication",

exhibited in *Pure White*. In *Coffee and Pencil* Mr. Ōta communicates on equal terms with people with and without disabilities, whereas in *Pure White* there are few characters who actively attempt to communicate with and understand Mashiro.

2 Emotion, Affect, and Conflictual Boundaries: *Pure White* (2017)

In *Pure White*, Mashiro is a teenage girl with a mild intellectual disability. Over the course of the film, she develops from a girl who does not care about her appearance and receives little attention from others to a young adult who falls in love, and she tries to break free from discrimination against her disability. Film style and the portrayal of emotions and affect are key to understanding how *Pure White* complicates the boundary between disability and non-disability. Ableism and patriarchy contribute to difficulties in overcoming this boundary. Indeed, Mashiro has hardly any efficient communication with others although she tries hard to break the stereotypes surrounding disability.

Many scenes in *Pure White* indicate the existence of a clear boundary that results in discrimination against characters with disabilities. The film introduces three discriminatory points of view, each of which is spread by rumors. First, disability is seen as equivalent to "abnormality", implying a binary opposition between disability and non-disability. In the film, Mashiro's family, people from her neighborhood, and even Mashiro herself believe that people with disabilities are "abnormal" and inferior to people without disabilities. In other words, Mashiro sees herself as the Other due to the influence of ableism. Second, a tendency to discriminate against characters with disabilities intersects with the paternalist aspects of Japanese society, resulting in increased victimization of those with disabilities. For instance, in the scene where Mashiro returns home after meeting the photographer Yui, her father says, "It's necessary for our family to protect Mashiro." Mashiro is no longer a child, yet she is not allowed to meet a male friend due to her disability. Although her father's concern and love for his daughter is understandable, it is evident that his interactions with Mashiro take place under the paternalistic supposition that people with disabilities should be protected. Third, some characters without disabilities in the film equate disability with incapability. For instance, due to Mashiro's intellectual disability, her older brother Ren turns down the suggestion that she join an indoor soccer team, saying that "she is not normal, with a mental disability similar to mental retardation." His response reflects stereotypes holding that people with intellectual disabilities are not "normal". Based on his determination that his sister is not "normal", Ren

deprives Mashiro of an opportunity to interact with others even though she may be talented at sports. Thus *Pure White* presents several examples of discrimination against people with disabilities.

In all of these cases, ableism is a crucial reason for the clear boundary between disability and non-disability. Rumors and gossip enhance an ableist image of Mashiro's disability. A female staff member who works with Yui in Toyama warns Yui not to become close with Mashiro due to her disability. When Yui, who is from Tokyo, asks about the disability, the female staff member admits that she has only heard of it from others, suggesting that she discriminates against people with disabilities even without direct knowledge of them. On the other hand, all of Mashiro's family members except her cousin Yukina overprotect Mashiro because she is a teenage girl with a disability who was once kidnapped. They identify Mashiro as a vulnerable potential victim because of her disability. In this way, her family's prejudice and overprotection actually make it almost impossible for Mashiro to break the shackles of disability.

This discourse on ableism is amplified by performative aspects of Mashiro's disability. Because Mashiro accepts the discriminatory discourse on her disability, she regards herself as an incapable, unintelligent, and abnormal victim. Her own perception of disability becomes a barrier to her love affair with Yui, and thus she cries and asks her mother why she is abnormal. Ableist discourse defines disability in the negative and builds a dichotomy between disability and non-disability. It appears to be difficult for characters with disabilities who suffer within an ableist society to rid themselves of their socially constructed identity as "disabled". Meanwhile, the disabled body is stereotyped, and social and biological aspects of disability become mixed. In this way, characters with disabilities come to understand themselves as victims. *Pure White* shows how ableism is a part of dominant discourse and how "normative" stereotypes about disabilities become constructed and reproduced in an ableist society.

It is important to reiterate how the treatment of bodies of girls and women with disabilities exposes the deep connections between ableism and patriarchy. In *Pure White*, patriarchy grants privileges to male characters, allowing them to judge female characters such as Mashiro. Mashiro lives in a small city where people are familiar with each other and families often rely on men to supply their families with sufficient income. Mashiro's father and elder brother not only interfere in her personal life, but also advance the story and control its rhythm, while at the same time they symbolize the patriarchal system in which Mashiro is protected but strictly controlled. Mashiro's decision to run away is caused by a series of misunderstandings propagated by men attempting to protect her. These begin with the young policeman Kugayama,

who is skeptical of a story about Yui stealing Mashiro's bicycle and contacts Mashiro's elder brother Ren. Ren concludes that Mashiro has been deceived by a strange man and tells his father this over the phone. This is followed by a scene in which Mashiro sits at the entrance to her home and prepares to go out while her father stands directly behind her and forbids her to leave, using the justification that Mashiro has been kidnapped before. The higher position of Mashiro's father symbolizes the patriarchal power that he possesses to discipline her (see Figure 1).

Figure 1: The higher position of Mashiro's father (*Pure White*, Sagan Pictures, 2017)

Her father's response prompts Mashiro to run away from home in order to meet Yui and apologize for breaking her promise to meet him. Throughout the process, Kugayama, Ren, and Mashiro's father never ask Mashiro about her own thoughts and opinions, nor do they confirm the actual circumstances of the situation. They are either confident about their judgments, or they do not believe that Mashiro has the ability to express her thoughts or engage in a meaningful relationship with others. Male characters dismiss all opportunities for discussion with Mashiro.

Most of the female characters in *Pure White* are dependent upon male characters, which is one of the reasons why they face gender discrimination. For instance, Mashiro's sister-in-law Misaki and her cousin Yukina help Mashiro dress up and keep her meeting with Yui a secret. They show concern for Mashiro because through talking with her they are able to observe subtle changes in her emotions and inner thoughts. However, misunderstanding and mistrust stemming from the male characters prevent Mashiro from developing any loving, adult relationship. Throughout the film, male characters dominate female characters, especially Mashiro.

In this way, the boundary between disability and non-disability is assumed or enhanced by

the influence of ableism, paternalism, and patriarchy in *Pure White*. Significantly, however, the film also blurs or transcends this boundary by highlighting the emotions of Mashiro in the process whereby she gradually falls in love with Yui. Emotionally, Mashiro is depicted as similar to other teenage girls without disabilities. Indeed, Mashiro's affection towards Yui and the "dis-communication" taking place within her family suggest the conflictual boundary between disability and non-disability. The cinematography and editing of the film play vital roles in showing this complex relationship.

The cinematography of the film effectively conveys subtle changes in emotions and affect, especially through close-up shots. At the beginning of the film, Mashiro does not attempt to hide her bored facial expression when photographs are being taken at her elder brother's wedding ceremony, while others around her act in a formal manner. It is obvious that Mashiro is different from the others participating in the wedding because she uses only small words and acts childishly. When Mashiro throws her handkerchief, Yui helps her retrieve it. Mashiro plays with his camera and takes a shot of herself accidentally when Yui is trying to retrieve the handkerchief (see Figure 2). This close-up shot creates opportunities for further interactions between Mashiro and Yui. In a later scene, when Yui takes photos from a boat, he sees Mashiro riding a bike on the street. Yui then calls out to her and shows her the previous close-up photo. Looking at the photo, Mashiro appears to be surprised and curious about her own face, asking, "Who is that?" Yui replies, "It is a good photo of you that you took by accident." This serves as a starting point for Mashiro to examine herself.

Later, Yui promises to teach Mashiro photography in return for her guidance around Toyama.

Figure 2: Photograph of Mashiro in Yui's camera (*Pure White*, Sagan Pictures, 2017)

Mashiro's facial expressions indicate that she begins to change; she feels happy and surprised when going out with Yui. Mashiro perceives the world differently through the camera and becomes capable of expressing her feelings and emotions through photos with the help of Yui. "Although we see the same view, our photos are different. That's how you see the world," Mashiro says. This moment depicts Mashiro's realization that different people have different thoughts and feelings, and that her own thoughts and feelings are unique.

Figure 3: Contrast between open and closed spaces (*Pure White*, Sagan Pictures, 2017)

In addition to the close-up shots, other cinematographic techniques involving space and light indicate how emotional variations alter the boundary between disability and non-disability. A long shot of a snowscape is used when Yui and Mashiro take photos together, creating a broad, pure, and bright space. This suggests that the boundary between Mashiro and Yui is blurred when Yui treats Mashiro equally. In contrast, medium shots are often used to depict Mashiro in her Japanese-style home, a small, narrow, and gloomy space, which is likely to make her feel depressed, suffocated, and isolated (see Figure 3).

Figure 4: Close-up shot of Mashiro's mixed emotions (*Pure White*, Sagan Pictures, 2017)

The contrast between the space of her home and the outdoor space with Yui indicates the conflicts between Mashiro and her family, leading to the climax in which she makes up her mind to disobey her father's orders and run away from home to see Yui at midnight. Mashiro wants to apologize for breaking the promise that she has made with Yui to go mountain climbing together. A close-up shot of her facial expression once again appears on screen, but this time she uses her face to display a variety of emotions and feelings, including desperation, frustration, worries, and expectation (see Figure 4). Mashiro's affect and emotions are consistent with the background music as well. When Mashiro runs away from home, this is accompanied by tense, sad music featuring piano and violin and the sound of heavy snow and raindrops, each suggesting Mashiro's complex feelings and prompting viewers to question the certainty of the boundary between disability and non-disability.

Along with cinematography and music, editing is another filmic technique that shows the conflictual boundary between disability and non-disability in *Pure White*. At the climax of the film, Mashiro asks Yui whether he can take her to Tokyo. Yui rejects her immediately and then Mashiro replies, "Because I am a person with disabilities? If I didn't have a disability, would you say 'Yes'?" A medium shot continues to capture Mashiro's facial expression for about eight seconds as if she is waiting for an answer; however, the film cuts to the next shot without showing Yui's facial expression on the screen or presenting his answer, suggesting that he has given an ambiguous reply (see Figure 5). Thus, the cut-away editing leaves a great deal open to interpretation, while showing the tension between stereotypes of disability and Yui's attitude, in which he treats Mashiro equally as a human being. Perhaps Yui does not want to hurt Mashiro's feelings by mentioning her disability and therefore does not use disability as an excuse to reject her. Perhaps he likes Mashiro but still cannot take her to Tokyo. It is also possible that he sees her only as a friend.

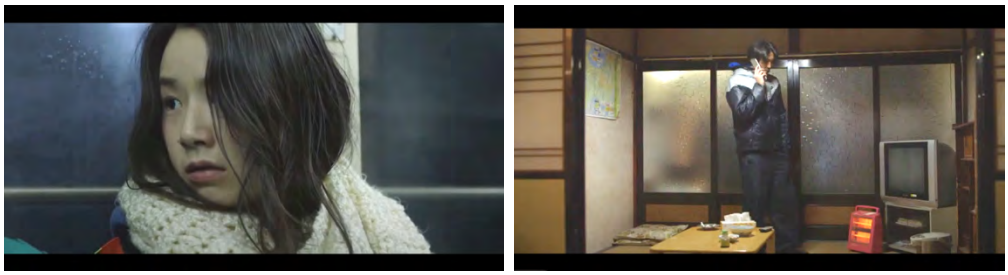

Figure 5: Cut-away editing (*Pure White*, Sagan Pictures, 2017)

Such cut-away editing not only suggests the conflictual boundary between Yui and Mashiro, but also indicates how she has internalized conventional ideas about disability. Influenced by

the social conventions related to disability, Mashiro assumes that Yui refuses her because of her disability, which is to be considered a disadvantage or shortcoming. It further strengthens ableism through other-representation in the film and has an effect on the later scene in which Mashiro tearfully asks her mother, "How can I become 'normal'?" after being brought back by her brother and father, showing that Mashiro believes she is "abnormal" due to her disability.

As a matter of fact, the performance of actors and actresses can also be regarded as a vital aspect of the ableist imagination of disability. The actress Satō Miyuki, who portrays Mashiro, actually has no disabilities; therefore, the viewer's perception of Mashiro's disability relies upon her performance. Reporting on the film indicates that Satō's portrayal of Mashiro is strongly based on the script written by Kitagawa Ayako, who used her brother, who has a mild intellectual disability, as a model.[7] Before shooting the film, Satō visited people with disabilities to observe their behaviors. Satō's performance was then managed and checked by a male director, Sakamoto Toshihiro, who also has no disabilities. In this way, many people without disabilities played important parts in creating the performance of Satō as Mashiro. Through her acting, Satō constructs Mashiro's disability and makes it visible.

In sum, *Pure White* forces viewers to rethink the conflictual boundary between disability and non-disability by questioning whether such a boundary is meaningful when considering emotions and relationships. As I elucidate in the next section, whereas *Pure White* concentrates on the miscommunication or "dis-communication" that takes place among characters, Imamura Ayako's documentary film *Coffee and Pencil* highlights the ambiguous nature of the boundary between disability and non-disability by showing how deaf people can communicate with others effectively and reach mutual understanding through use of the body and handwritten notes.

3 The Body, Handwritten Notes, Voice-Overs, and Ambiguous Boundaries: *Coffee and Pencil* (2011)

Imamura Ayako's *Coffee and Pencil* employs interplay between visuality and vocality, such as body language, handwritten notes, and voice-overs, to represent the ambiguous boundary between disability and non-disability. Deafness is represented through clumsy pronunciations, sign language, gestures, body language, and subtitles. In this film, the combined use of all of

[7] Bandō Tatsuki 坂東樹, "*Mashiro no koi* Satō Miyuki tandoku intabyū"『真白の恋』佐藤みゆき 単独インタビュー, *CINEMA Life!*, http://www.cinema-life.net/interview/1702_msrk (accessed on 27 May 2020).

these dimensions makes it possible for people with and without disabilities to communicate open-mindedly and reach mutual understanding, thereby suggesting that the boundary between disability and non-disability is ambiguous.

There are two protagonists in the documentary: Mr. Ōta and Imamura Ayako. Mr. Ōta, a surf shop owner, is deaf and communicates with customers through written words and gestures. When customers come in, Mr. Ōta offers them coffee and shows them a signboard reading "Welcome. I am deaf. Please write any questions you have on this paper." Imamura, the female director who narrates the documentary, is also deaf and speaks in a slightly unclear voice. Imamura and Mr. Ōta both use sign language, writing, and their voices to call direct attention to their deafness and show the clear boundary between disability and non-disability, yet they regard their deafness as a simple fact and do not accept stereotypes about disability.

Figure 6: Silence, sign language, and handwritten Japanese subtitles
(*Coffee and Pencil*, Studio Aya, 2011)

Handwritten subtitles, written notes, and Imamura's voice-over emphasize individual traits, in contrast to the standardized fonts and pronunciation used in other segments of society. At the beginning of the film, Imamura uses sign language to explain her deafness and her purpose in making the film. This message is accompanied by silence, and handwritten subtitles serve as a translation of Imamura's sign language (see Figure 6). After that, handwritten notes from the audience who watched other parts of the film are shown close up for a few seconds accompanied by a voice-over by Imamura (see Figure 7). Imamura's voice-over is a bit awkward and her pronunciation differs from the standard Japanese pronunciation.

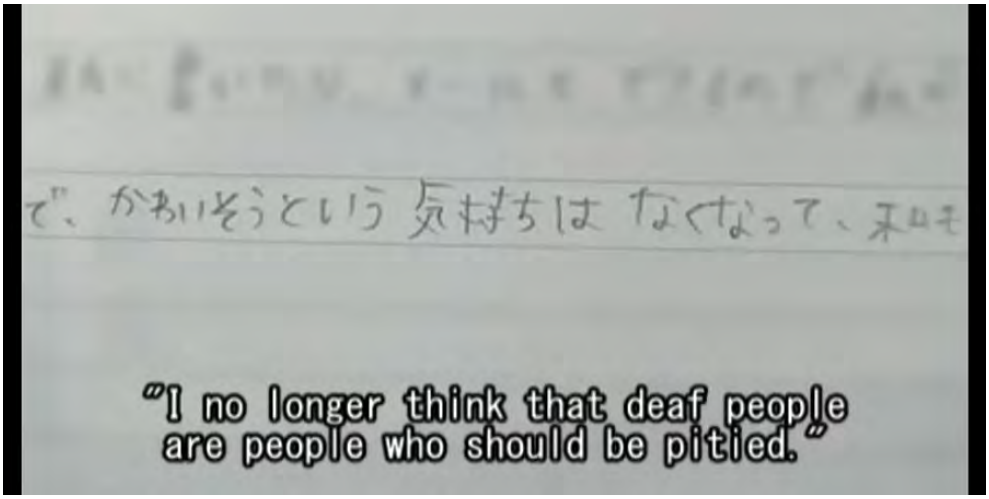

Figure 7: Handwritten notes from the audience (*Coffee and Pencil*, Studio Aya, 2011)

Imamura's voice-over is likely intended to remind spectators about one boundary between disability and non-disability. Here, it is important to pay attention to two points about her voice-over: the quality and the content. In terms of quality, Imamura's voice is plain and calm, and she mumbles slightly; all of these traits are related to her deafness. In terms of content, her voice-over narrates stories, describes events, and expresses her inner thoughts, emotions, and feelings. Although Imamura speaks in the first person, she seldom exhibits her feelings and emotions via the voice-over narration, instead expressing herself primarily through the meaning of the words she speaks. In addition, Imamura's voice-over is sometimes replaced by written words, with deep or significant meanings shown on the screen. Imamura's voice-over reveals her identity as an introverted and reflective deaf person.

Next, Imamura turns her hand-held camera to Mr. Ōta, who happily communicates with customers in his surfboard shop by using gestures. The ambiguous boundary between disability and non-disability is conveyed via the hand-held camera as well. Imamura remains behind the hand-held camera to record scenes in which Mr. Ōta communicates with customers or drives to visit his mentor, which allows spectators to observe him from her perspective. Imamura often remains silent and shows few emotions as a calm "outsider" while behind the camera and only expresses herself later on through voice-overs or written words. The boundary between Imamura and spectators with and without disabilities is blurred because they all see through Imamura's hand-held camera.

Shown through close-up shots, Mr. Ōta's complicated emotions blur the boundaries that are expected according to stereotypes of disability. Close-up shots are used to capture the sign

language, gestures, and facial expression of Mr. Ōta, which might make spectators feel closer to him and try to understand his feelings. After Mr. Ōta visits his mentor and discusses the problem of how to build a perfect surfboard, it seems that he finally feels relieved and comforted. He smiles with tears, which is shown in a slow-motion close-up shot (see Figure 8). At this point, Mr. Ōta is depicted as a professional craftsman who works hard to make excellent surfboards. Whether Mr. Ōta is deaf or not is unimportant here. The boundary between disability and non-disability is blurred by Mr. Ōta's emotions and bodily responses, including smiling, bursting into tears, and so on.

Figure 8: Close-up shot of Mr. Ōta (*Coffee and Pencil*, Studio Aya, 2011)

Non-diegetic music in *Coffee and Pencil* often helps to express emotion and suggest the blurred boundary between disability and non-disability. Mr. Ōta visited a number of surfboard makers to obtain necessary skills before he opened his own shop. However, he was rejected by most of the makers, who told him it would be too difficult to teach someone who could not hear. They adhered to the stereotype that disability is a form of incapability, so they concluded that Mr. Ōta was incapable of understanding and communicating due to his deafness. Mr. Ōta's experience of rejection and discrimination is shown through written conversations displayed while the sea and soft Hawaiian music are shown in the background. Spectators may imagine how Mr. Ōta feels when he is rejected due to his deafness, making them rethink and reflect upon the relationship between people with and without disabilities (see Figure 9).

The film shows that handwritten notes and body language allow people with and without disabilities to reach mutual understanding. The body is a site through which they can interact and communicate with each other; people write words with their pencils and their ideas change

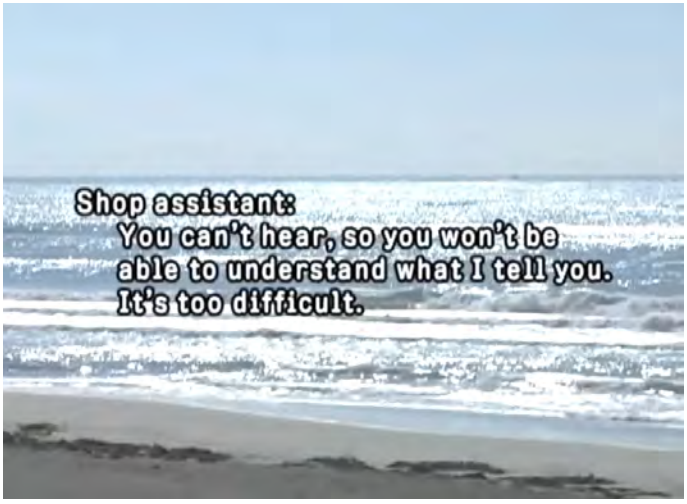

Figure 9: Rejection accompanied by Hawaiian music and the sea in the background
(*Coffee and Pencil*, Studio Aya, 2011)

when they read the notes of others. Different people leave different messages, and their handwritten words are penned in different styles. These handwritten words show the emotions and thoughts people had when they were writing. Thus, the handwritten notes indicate the context-dependent indexicality of the body. People can pass on their messages by talking, writing, showing, and hearing, and they influence each other by expressing their feelings and caring about others. Mr. Ōta is a craftsman who makes and repairs surfboards, and at the same time, he shows his care for his customers by interacting with them by means of pencils and coffee. At first customers are hesitant to enter the shop when Mr. Ōta greets them in a strange voice due to his deafness, but after he comes up with the idea of offering free coffee, his customers feel his kindness and begin to communicate with him by writing and using body language. In this way, Mr. Ōta gradually acquires regular customers who enjoy communicating with him. In addition, he invites professional surfers to have dinner in his house and discuss the problems he faces as a craftsman pursuing perfection. Although his sign language needs to be translated by his wife, surfers understand his problems and comfort him in their own ways. The film uses close-up shots of handwritten notes to show the gratitude customers express to Mr. Ōta for his support and care (see Figure 10). The boundary between disability and non-disability is blurred when people with and without disabilities actively share their thoughts and emotions in this way. In *Coffee and Pencil*, it seems that people with and without disabilities are equal. All of the people who appear possess their own complicated emotions and thoughts.

Additionally, the contrast between Mr. Ōta and Imamura makes it possible to use *Coffee and*

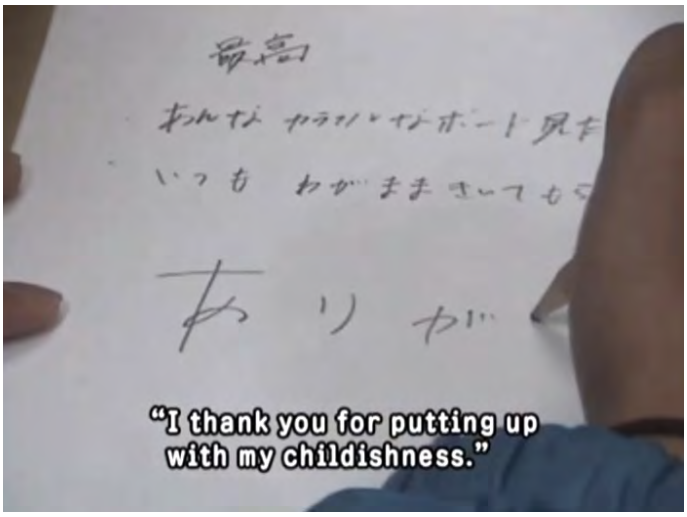

Figure 10: Handwritten notes (*Coffee and Pencil*, Studio Aya, 2011)

Pencil to analyze the relationship between gender and disability. It is interesting to note that Imamura, the female director, remains more constrained and hesitant than Mr. Ōta, even though Imamura holds the camera that observes and records his life. Over the course of interviewing Mr. Ōta, he changes her way of thinking about the relationship between people with and without disabilities. At the end of the film, Imamura says, "I myself thought of deaf and hearing people as different, but hearing people and deaf people are the same." It is true that she learns how to communicate with people without disabilities from Mr. Ōta during the shooting of the documentary. Nevertheless, the way that Imamura represents Mr. Ōta as a perfect and warm-hearted man at every moment requires attention as well. Throughout the documentary, Mr. Ōta is depicted as a professional craftsman who works hard and communicates happily with customers; in contrast, Imamura was quiet and discreet while behind the camera, even though her narrative was added later. Most spectators may feel that Imamura shows respect and admiration to Mr. Ōta because he is able to communicate with everyone open-mindedly, but further investigation is required in order to determine whether the difference between Imamura and Mr. Ōta is due to their personalities or to deep-rooted aspects of culture such as patriarchy.

In the end, *Coffee and Pencil* suggests a monistic view on disability that criticizes any attempts to delineate a clear boundary between disability and non-disability. In contrast to ableism, which views disability as a form of error, alternatives and potentialities are highlighted when disability is understood as an indication of the variety of human experience. As Gary Gutting explains, through Foucauldian politics "society as a whole will be transformed and

enriched by what it had previously rejected as errors."[8] The disabled body makes the problems of ableism obvious and visible, requiring a search for solutions that benefit everyone in society.

Coffee and Pencil provides a template for an alternative, non-ableist way to show the potentialities of disability through voice and sound. Imamura Ayako's voice-over is an alternative to a standard voice-over with perfect pronunciations. Her voice-over is not fluent and does not incorporate much rising and falling intonation. Meanwhile, Mr. Ōta communicates to customers mainly through writing and body language, which are alternatives to speaking out loud. It is hard to miss the sound of the pencil amid the silence. Communication continues even when it is silent, and people understand each other even though they do not speak a word. While sounds of non-human objects are often neglected in films in order to focus on the human voice, *Coffee and Pencil* emphasizes alternative sounds like the scratch of pencil writing and the sound of the sea. These alternative sounds and voices in *Coffee and Pencil* problematize the fixed boundary between disability and non-disability and provide new insight into the meaningful connections between people with and without disabilities.

4 Conclusion

This article has shown how the contemporary Japanese films *Pure White* and *Coffee and Pencil* represent the boundary between disability and non-disability in new and telling ways. These films employ sound, narrative, cinematography, and editing to portray this boundary as ambiguous and conflictual. By showing the emotions of characters with disabilities, in the case of *Pure White*, or through focusing attention on the body, handwritten notes, and voice-overs in the case of *Coffee and Pencil*, the films challenge viewers to rethink stereotypes about disability. Moreover, these films represent the body as a site at which ableist power relations between disability and non-disability become visible and intersect with other power structures such as patriarchy. Ultimately, these filmic representations may help us to move beyond stereotypical images of disability and to better understand the potentialities of disability as a significant part of human experience.

[8] Gary Gutting, *Foucault: A Very Short Introduction*, Oxford University Press, 2019, pp. 86–87.